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## Schumann's Quartets

Three earlier recordings of Schumann's String Quartets, and how Gramophone rated them



NOVEMBER 1966

Schumann String Quartet No 1  
Drolc Quartet

DGG ● SLPM139143 (12in • 32s 3d)  
It would be difficult to imagine a

much better recording than that by the Drolc. The performance combines poetry with a cool aristocratic dignity. The treatment is not so much austere as infinitely subtle: all those nuances of tempo and phrasing which make for *Innigkeit* are there even in such a briskly rhythmic movement as the *Scherzo*; but they are never obtrusive. *Julian Budden*



JUNE 2003

Schumann String Quartets No 1 & 3  
Zehetmair Qt

ECM © 472 159-2 (50' • DDD)

The Zehetmair Quartet's coupling focuses the music's alternating

wildness and fragility with altogether unique perception. There is an agitated, combustible and loving view of Schumann, a credible trip into his troubled world that reflects older playing styles not by exaggerating or abandoning vibrato but by constantly varying tone, tempo, bow pressure and modes of attack. These are not comfortable performances. They pass on cosmetic appeal and would rather grate and rail than pander to surface 'gloss'. So be warned. But they are profoundly beautiful in their truthful appropriation of music that can be both poignant and aggressive. *Rob Cowan*



DECEMBER 2011

Schumann String Quartets  
Doric Qt

Chandos © CHAN10692 (74' • DDD)

The Zehetmair play up extremes in the music more but the Doric

are equally colourful and give them a run for their money. The opening of the First Quartet is beautifully managed – sustained, with a clarity of counterpoint pointing up the individuality of the four players as well as their collective finesse – before giving way to the lolling *Allegro* that, as so often with this composer, attempts a carefree demeanour but doesn't quite manage it. The shifts in mood in the Third Quartet are a real challenge, here superbly caught, such as the hymnic third movement which yields to more agitated writing, a gear-change that you simply don't notice here, so naturally is it done. The finale skirts close to mania at times, not quite so close as the Zehetmair, perhaps, but still dangerously close. *Harriet Smith*

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(aka Domenico Pandolfi, 1629-?1687). He was born near Siena, raised in Venice, worked in Innsbruck for some years and later in Messina, Madrid and Rome. His first two printed opuses are lost, whereas the Op 3 violin sonatas published at Innsbruck in 1660 were dedicated to Anna de' Medici.

Violinist Gunar Letzbor has already recorded Pandolfi's Op 4 sonatas (*Arcana*, 2011), and his rhapsodic playing is accompanied by a broad continuo group consisting of guitar, archlute, keyboard (switching between harpsichord and organ), violone and colascione (a long-necked southern Italian lute). The arsenal of five continuo instruments yields furious flurries of scampering chords in the *Adagios* that flank *La Cesta*, and yet there is sweetness and intimacy in slower movements notable for their expressive melodic chromaticism (eg the second movement of *La Melana* or the ciaccona at the heart of *La Castella*); these tend to be when fewer continuo players are involved. Those who prefer the scale of just two instruments might remain happier with the vibrant *Gramophone* Award-winning set by Andrew Manze accompanied by Richard Egarr only. Letzbor's extrovert fantasy and Ars Antiqua Austria's richly textured playing should win some friends, and certainly suggests how Pandolfi paved the way for Biber. *David Vickers*

*Selected comparison:*

*Manze, Egarr (10/99®) (HARM) HMG50 7241*

## Röntgen

'String Trios, Vol 1'

String Trios – No 1, Op 76; No 2, 'Dvořák'; No 3; No 4, 'Walzer Suite'

Lendval String Trio

Champs Hill © CHRCD068 (61' • DDD)



Julius Röntgen (1855-1932) was hugely prolific, his output extending to

around 500 works. It is fair to say that he probably wrote too much, often composing not one or two works in a given genre but four or five, often in the same year. There are 16 string trios, the first four of which were written between 1915 and 1919. The next nine were then produced in threes in 1920, 1923 and 1925 respectively.

Fifteen of the trios are unpublished (No 1 was printed in 1924), languishing unplayed in a Dutch archive. Taking the present group of four, their neglect is astonishing given the freshness of melodic and thematic invention they display (something his works are often criticised

for lacking but here deriving from Dutch folk music), their craftsmanship of construction and sheer *joie de vivre*.

For sure, they break no new ground harmonically or stylistically, firmly rooted in mid- to late-19th-century practice. But so what? I defy anyone to come away from listening to No 1 – 'a protest against my 60 years', Röntgen wryly commented – without a smile on their face. The Second (1918) takes as its starting point a motif from Dvořák's Violin Concerto, from which a superbly spun minor masterpiece ensues. The Third and Fourth (completed within days of each other in August 1919) play around gently with, respectively, folk dances and waltzes to highly entertaining effect.

The Lendvai Trio's enthusiasm for these works compels attention and one can hear the broad grins on their faces as they played. With beautifully clear, natural sound, listening to this disc is a delightful way to spend an hour.

*Guy Rickards*

## Schubert

String Quintet, D956

Diotima Quartet with Anne Gastinel vc

Naïve © V5331 (57' • DDD)



Another C major Quintet – following on from the Pavel Haas Quartet (with cellist

Danjulo Ishizaka), whose interpretation I have been enjoying immensely for the past few months. I did wonder whether the overt emotionalism of that reading would pall, but not one bit of it – their confidence to make the music their own remains absolutely compelling.

The Diotima are particularly celebrated for their interpretations of contemporary repertoire and, joined by celebrated cellist Anne Gastinel, they make a strong and assured fivesome, with none of the sense of four-plus-one that afflicted the recent Takács reading with Ralph Kirshbaum. Like the Pavel Haas, there's plenty of energised, highly reactive playing on display, not least in the delightfully mellifluous duetting of the two cellos in the second theme of the opening movement. However, it's the Pavel Haas who convey more tellingly the ambiguity of mood at the end of the same movement, the final chord shot through with more than a hint of the darkness of what is to come.

What follows is the heart of the work, the aching, extended slow movement, and it's here that I have reservations about the new



Compels attention: the Lendvai String Trio record trios by Julius Röntgen at Champs Hill

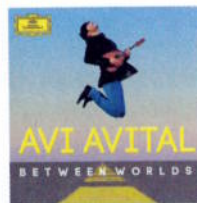
version. The Pavel Haas weren't exactly fast but they justified their steady tempo with a reading of great depth and detail. But no amount of beauty of tone (and there's plenty) from the Diotima and Gastinel can make up for the sense that it's just too slow. Perhaps this could work in the concert hall but on disc it simply sounds indulgent, and fissures soon appear in the structure. Even though they judge well the central cataclysmic outpouring, and the *Scherzo* that follows, this remains a serious hindrance to wholehearted recommendation. And in the finale the Viennese-tinged second idea also slows a little too much, though their build-up to the end of the work is full of panache. So, a mixed experience and not a reading to rival the Pavel Haas/Ishizaka in my affections. **Harriet Smith**

*Selected comparisons:*

*Takács Qt, Kirshbaum (12/12) (HYPE) CDA67864*  
*Pavel Haas Qt, Ishizaka (10/13) (SUPR) SU4110-2*

## 'Between Worlds'

**Bartók** Romanian Folk Dances, Sz56 **Bat Chaim** Freilach Ron **Bloch** Nigun **Dvořák** String Quartet No 12, 'American', Op 96 B179 - Finale **Falla** Siete Canciones populares españolas **Monti** Csárdás **Piazzolla** Fuga y Misterio **Traditional** Bucimis. Hen Ferchetan **Tsintsadze** Sachidao. Three Miniatures **Villa-Lobos** Bachianas brasileiras No 5 - Aria (Cantilena)  
**Avi Avital** mand with **Richard Galliano** acco  
**Giora Feidman** cl **Catrin Finch** hp **Itamar Doari** perc  
**Potsdam Chamber Academy**  
 DG © 479 1069GH (66 • DDD)



With mandolin players such as Avi Avital and Chris Thile doing such wondrous things with Bach et al, you might be forgiven for thinking the guitar is in danger of losing its place as the crossover plucked instrument of choice in the classical realm. Well, maybe not just yet. But Avital's follow-up to his superb recording of Bach concertos (11/12) only confirms what we already knew: that here is a musician who recognises no boundaries except those of good taste, and who has the artistry to persuade listeners to follow him anywhere.

This time, joined by a stellar line-up of soloists (including another formidable Bachian, accordionist Richard Galliano) Avital explores traditional music as seen through the lens of 'classical' composers, an exploration to which both Avital and the mandolin are ideally suited. Not only that but the different textures afforded by different configurations – ranging from mandolin and harp to mandolin and orchestra with various combinations of winds, strings and plucked and percussion instruments in between – bring out the distinctive flavours of the music of the composer and the folk tradition he's drawing on.

This is as true in a wild Georgian, Romanian or Bulgarian dance courtesy

of Sul Khan Tsintsadze, Bartók or 'trad' as it is of a soft, dark Spanish song from Falla's *Siete Canciones populares españolas* or the gorgeous setting of *Hen Ferchetan* by Avital and harpist Catrin Finch, with which the recording ends. And through it all, again, is Avital's mandolin, not just singing but laughing and crying in equal measure. **William Yeoman**

## 'Green'

**Kurtág** Officium breve in memoriam Andreae Szervánszky **Schumann** String Quartets - No 1, Op 41 No 1; No 3, Op 41 No 3  
**Amaryllis Quartet**  
 Genuin © GENI3290 (71 • DDD)



'Green' is the final volume in a three-disc series by the Amaryllis Quartet that combines contemporary works for string quartet with mainstream Romantic repertoire. That's not to say that their Romantic choices have been slipshod or catchpenny, and this final pairing of Schumann and Kurtág is as much about similarity of effect as it is about pure contrast. The tuning and balance in every piece on this disc is absolutely faultless, and it is this one fact that launches an interesting programming idea into a whole other world of mien and conclusion.

To mention the fact that the opening of the first movement of the first of the